DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 600 SO 018 048

AUTHOR Teeter, Ruskin
TITLE The Opening Up of American Education to Black Americans.
PUB DATE Jan 87
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Blacks; *Civil Rights Legislation; *Educational Discrimination; Educationally Disadvantaged; *Equal Education
IDENTIFIERS Brown v Board of Education; Plessy v Ferguson

ABSTRACT

Students, parents, and teachers of today should know full well that even a whole phalanx of educational reforms does not automatically prevail over the social bigotries that persist from the past. This paper provides an uncomfortable reminder of how the democratic purposes of U.S. education must be sustained not only by court decisions and legislative mandates, but by wholesale public understanding that a continued "opening up" of U.S. schools is the only direction possible in a democracy. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED279600

THE OPENING UP OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

TO BLACK AMERICANS

by Ruskin Teeter

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ruskin Teeter

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO018048

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CLEARINGHOUSE ON TEACHER EDUCATION

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

AUTHOR ABSTRACT
(To Accompany Document Submitted to ERIC/SP)

Author: Ruskin Teeter

Title: The Opening Up of American Education to Black Americans

Abstract (up to 200 words):

Students, parents and teachers of today should know full well that even a whole phalanx of educational reforms does not automatically prevail over the social bigotries that persist from the past. This paper provides an uncomfortable reminder of how the democratic purposes of American education must be sustained not only by court decisions and legislative mandates, but by wholesale public understanding that a continued "opening up" of American schools is the only direction possible in a democracy.

Key Words:

"The Opening Up of American Education to Black Americans"

Truly equal public education for most black Americans is still a dream deferred. In Topeka, scene of Brown v. Board of Education (1954), black parents are still claiming that schools are essentially segregated; that facilities at predominantly black schools are inferior to those at the mostly white schools, and that the best of Topeka's three high schools is still 96% white. In Little Rock, scene of a 1950's integration fight, public schools are 64% black, even though blacks make up only 34% of the city's population, signaling a phenomenon called "white flight." And the Dallas public schools are still among the most segregated in the nation with 66 of its 186 schools "one race" schools in which more than 90% of the students are of a single race. Nationwide, nearly half the 11 million black, Hispanic and other minority children still attend public schools that are at least moderately segregated, and in the Northeast and North Central regions of the country, two out of every three minority students attend moderately segregated schools. Ironically, in the once heavily segregated Southeast, only a third of the minority students are now attending such schools.

But despite such uncomfortable statistics, the truth is that American schools have been making enormous strides

in extending education to black youth - often in the face of incredible odds. In so doing, they provide a comfortable reminder of the democratic purposes of American education.

To underscore the accomplishments of the school in extending liberalism, republicanism and democracy to millions of "new Americans," one needs but to look back at a very recent history. Even at mid-20th Century, the public view of black Americans was still based on 19th Century sociology. In 1946, for example, the Encyclopaedia Britannica maintained that the Negro's "affinity" for dancing and for "troubled, jumpy, neurotic" music could hardly be attributed to environmental causes alone. Even as late as 1956, two years after the Brown v. Board decision, the Britannica was still claiming that in certain characteristics blacks were "closely related to the highest anthropoids," and that they stood "on a lower evolutionary plane than white men." Given suitable training, however, Britannica suggested that blacks were capable of becoming craftsmen "of considerable skill, particularly in metal work, carpentry, and carving." [1]

Certainly, the school has been instrumental in improving upon these attitudes over the ensuing 29 years; and even more certainly, modern Americans are light years away from the view that blacks should be denied schooling altogether, not as a punishment, but as a positive benefit to them.

Education was the very last thing "these flesh-eating, blood-drinking, gluttonous, lazy and debased" blacks needed, Debow's Review declared in 1855. First, they should be taught to "plow, reap, forge, build, paint and print." Civilized to that extent, they might then (and only then) be ready for book learning. [2]

The story of the 99-year trek through the wilderness separating the Debow's Review statement from the 1954 Brown v. Board decision is, of course, one of epic proportions. It began in 1849, when the Massachusetts Supreme Court heard a case that was the sensation of the day. Five-year-old Sarah Roberts had been required to attend Boston's Smith Grammar school for black children. Its run-down condition, cramped rooms, defaced walls and shattered equipment were a matter of public record. On her way to that school she walked past five better equipped and better managed schools for white children. When her father requested her reassignment to the school nearest her home, the board of education (by split decision) denied the request. At this point, Boston attorney Charles Sumner, later to become one of the United States Senate's most powerful figures, entered the case on Roberts' side. When the case reached the state Supreme Court, his arguments were followed in every section of the country.

Roberts asked essentially the same question that Brown asked 105 years later: "shall black and white children be schooled together?". [3] Interestingly, Sumner's arguments epitomized those of Thurgood Marshall during the 1930's, 1940's and early 1950's as he and civil rights lawyers argued their way on a case-by-case basis to the United States Supreme Court. Sumner assailed the needless expense of operating separate school systems for white and black children. Children could be classified by sex or age or intelligence, or by any other reasonable criterion, he declared; but they could not be classified simply by color or race. To do so would be to "brand a whole race with the stigma of inferiority." Sumner also pointed out that segregated schools could never be equal and that white children were as seriously harmed by them as black children. "Their hearts," he said, "while yet tender with childhood are necessarily hardened" by such "legalized uncharitableness."

The outcome of Roberts was of far-reaching consequence. The court ruled that school districts could provide separate schools for white and black children so long as the schools were equally "well fitted." This phrasing would give birth forty-seven years later to the "separate but equal" principle in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Within another fifty-eight years, Plessy itself would be struck down - ironically, in a language

that seemed to reach out to Charles Sumner. Segregating black children from others solely on grounds of race, the court wrote (repeating Sumner's argument) affected "their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." It generated feelings of inferiority and it impaired children's ability to learn by lowering morale and ambition, and by instilling defeatist attitudes. Segregation destroyed self-respect and stamped children (again repeating Sumner's argument) with a badge of inadequacy and inferiority. Segregation was a source of personal humiliation for children.

Moreover (still again as Sumner had argued more than a century earlier), white children were also harmed by segregation because they learned to stereotype and to generalize about entire groups of people. Segregation created a confused set of values in their minds, because they could readily observe the contradictions between the principles of equality they were taught in school, and the actual social conditions that prevailed.

With the Brown decision, the view of the lone dissenter in Plessy (that the Constitution is "color blind") prevailed. And Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes' belief that "a dissent in a court of last resort is an appeal to the brooding spirit of the law, (and) to the intelligence of a future day" was confirmed.

Notes

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1946 ed., s.v. "Negro, The American." See also editions spanning the years 1946-1956, s.v. "Negro."

2. Volume 18 (1855): 666.

3. For a full account of Sumner's remarks see his Argument . . . against the Constitutionality of Separate Colored Schools, in the Case of Sarah C. Roberts v. the City of Boston. Before the Supreme Court of Mass., Dec. 4, 1849 (Boston: n.p., 1849). Parts of this are quoted in Daniel Calhoun (ed.), The Educating of Americans: A Documentary History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969) pp. 333-340. Of all the ironies in the text above, the greatest is that Roberts was quickly a dead letter as far as the state of Massachusetts was concerned. The legislature there statutorily desegregated schools in 1855. For Roberts' wider significance outside Massachusetts, see Leonard W. Levy and Harlan B. Phillips, "The Roberts Case: Source of the 'Separate But Equal' Doctrine," American Historical Review 56 (1951): 510-518. Richard Kluger's Simple Justice (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975) also remains definitive.